

New format: Evers says budget will include steps toward minimum wage increase, restore DNR scientists

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Gov. Tony Evers says his budget will include steps toward increasing the minimum wage and the restoration of some science positions at the Department of Natural Resources.

But he didn't offer specifics in an interview at Marquette University Law School Tuesday, even joking with host Mike Gousha that he told him "something secret."

Former Gov. Scott Walker and GOP lawmakers in 2015 approved reducing DNR senior science staff as part of a plan that cut agency positions.

"That was a mistake, and I want to correct that mistake," Evers said.

He also said the budget he releases Feb. 28 will put the state on the path to increase the minimum wage "without impacting business across the state" through what he called a "slow process."

"We're not going to 15 (dollars) in the next two years. Let's put it that way," Evers said. "We'll find some intermediate steps that have yet to be determined."

The offices of Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos and the Joint Finance co-chairs either didn't return calls yesterday or declined comment, citing the lack of specifics Evers provided.

During the hour-long presentation, Evers also said the education proposal in his budget will be "almost identical" to the \$1.4 billion plan he proposed while state superintendent.

He said the proposal will include a \$600 million boost to special education, after-school programming and an expansion of a program that helps districts that educate students who are English learners. There are about 48,000 student who meet that definition in Wisconsin schools, according to the DPI website, and 80

percent of them speak Spanish at home.

“All those things are all about fairness and equity,” Evers said of his education proposals.

Asked about vouchers, Evers said his budget won't move toward phasing out the program.

Evers was coy about other provisions in his upcoming budget, including transportation.

Evers said he “can guarantee” the budget won't propose increasing the gas tax by \$1, a charge Walker levied during the campaign. But Evers said he wasn't prepared to say what will be proposed in terms of the gas tax, because he is waiting for recommendations from the task force he created.

Evers also said he's “agnostic” on tolling, an option GOP leaders have raised in recent weeks to pump up transportation revenues. Evers said that option would be years away.

He also said there won't be any other criminal justice overhaul measures in his budget beyond the provision to legalize medical marijuana and decriminalize the possession, manufacturing or distribution of 25 grams or less of marijuana.

And he repeated that his budget will fully fund a tuition freeze at the UW System while providing additional resources. Evers added he supports providing an option for those with student loan debt to refinance it. But he declined to say whether he would propose something along those lines in the budget.

Evers strongly hinted he'll veto the GOP version of a middle-class tax cut.

“Not much,” Evers told Gousha when asked if there's any question if he'll veto it.

GOP leaders sent the bill to Evers late last week, setting up a Thursday deadline for him to sign it, veto it or allow it to become law without his signature.

Evers has proposed capping a tax credit for manufacturers to help pay for his version of the income tax cut, saying he opposes the GOP approach of using the state's projected \$691.5 million balance at the end of this fiscal year to cover the cost over the next two years.

Evers said there could be savings in areas of the budget to help fund it. But with the tax cut in a separate bill as Republicans have done, it takes those options “off the table.”

“Do I think we can solve this? Yes. But it should be solved through the budget process,” Evers said.